

COVER STORY

Chiao Lan Dam

A Wonderful Scenic Lake

with Limestone Islets

Khao Sok

National park



*By Thawat Wattana
Photos by Induang*

Many people enjoy limestone landforms because these natural phenomena are marvelous and fantastic in shape and contain many wonders inside – mystical caves, beautiful stalactites and stalagmites and even underground streams. But such mountains and hills are not found everywhere in the world. On the contrary, they appear mostly in the tropical and subtropi-



The scenic view of the crest of Ratchaphrappa (Chiao Lan) Dam

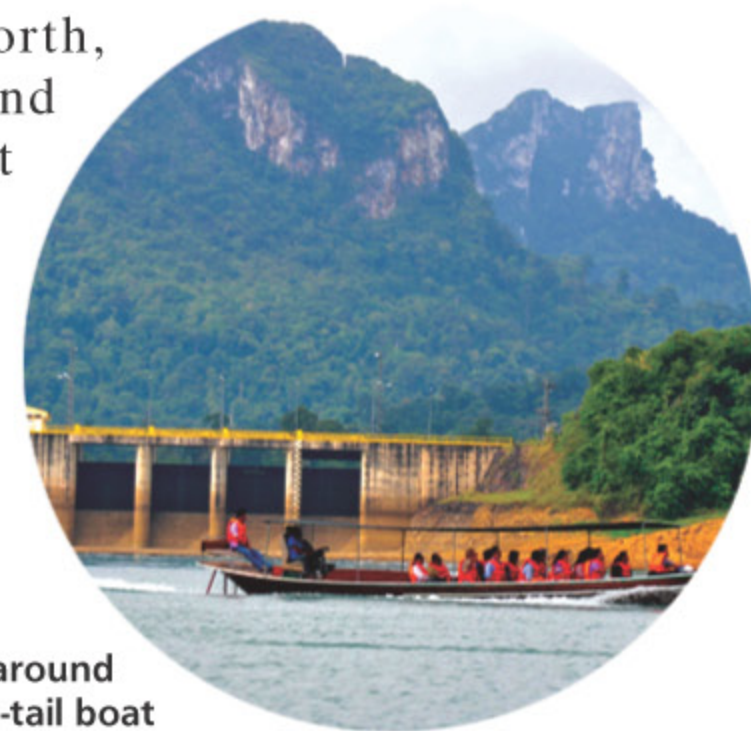
cal zones. That is because they are formed when the calcium carbonate in the limestone is carried away in solution by rain and groundwater containing carbon dioxide, leaving only the insoluble material to form a covering to the rocks, and only in these regions both the annual rainfall and the carbon dioxide content in the rain are very high.

Consequently, today the most famous limestone landforms whose names are listed in the UNESCO's Book of World Heritage Sites are – (1) the South China Karst,

which includes Shilin Karst near Kunming and the Guilin ñ Yangshu Group of limestone landforms. (2) Ha Long Bay in the Gulf of Tonkin, which boasts some 1,600 limestone islands and islets. (3) Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, USA, which has a network of over 560 km. of surveyed passageways.

Thailand is also rich in limestone landforms, mostly locating along its western border, almost right from Chiang Mai and Mae

Hong Son in the far north, through Kanchanaburi and Phetchaburi down to Surat Thani, Phang-nga, Krabi, Trang and Satun in the far south. In these five southern provinces, limestone mountain ranges and isolated and joining hills are



A leisure cruise around the dam by long-tail boat



The Group of Three or Khao Sam Kloe is a photogenic spot where the name **"Guilin of Thailand" comes from.**

found all over, both on land and offshore and have become among the principal attractions for Thai and foreign tourists for decades, similar to the Guilin region of China, where the limestone landscape has been known for centuries as the "most beautiful of the world". But among the numerous scenic limestone landforms in southern Thailand, there is one very special site that may surpass all the others in one aspect but that has not become widely known enough, perhaps because of its somewhat remote location, and so a need is felt to give it a recommendation.



You may have seen Ko Tapu and other steep islets on Phang-nga Bay. You may have visited Chiang Dao Cave near Chiang Mai, which is among the largest in Thailand. You may have been taken to a small roadside hill near Phetchaburi town and found to your surprise that there is such a large cave inside the hill named Khao Yoi which is only about 120 metres high. But have you ever found any limestone mountains or hills around or on a large lake? There is one in Surat Thani. The lake is called Chiao Lan, also named Ratchaprapha and is a part of Khao Sok National Park.

Khao Sok National Park, covering an area of 645.52 sq.km. of dense forest, was set up in 1980 as the 22nd national park of Thailand. Later, after a dam was built and the area of water of the reservoir was added to the park, making a total of 738.74 sq.km.

Ratchaprapha Dam was built in celebration of the 60th birthday of His Majesty King Bhumibol. It is also called Chiao Lan, because it is the name of the village where the dam was constructed to stop the water from the small stream Phasaeng. The dam is 94 meters high



and 761 meters long and the reservoir has a water storing capacity of 5,639 million cubic metres. The work was started in 1982 and completed in 1987 at a cost of 5,095 million baht.

After its completion, about 162 limestone hills partly submerged and became islets of various shapes and sizes. Among them, the most striking must be a group of three or Khao Sam Kloe in Thai, which are of about the same size with some verdant vegetation on top, lining up rather neatly and leaving passages between them just wide enough for small boats to pass. Anyone seeing the scene on the spot or in a photo of it must be amazed at the miracle of creation of nature or the Almighty. The area is a photogenic spot where the name "Guilin of Thailand" comes from.



Though some people may have an enjoyable one day trip, many tourists prefer to get more pleasure from spending several nights at the lake. Simple and close to nature raft houses operated by the park and private individuals are offered at quite low rates (with meals and activities). There are lots of things to see and do such as fishing, kayaking, canoeing, swimming, and sightseeing or you can simply relax on the raft house reading your favourite paperback.



Lovely little raft houses in the lake

A lovely group of three, plus more than 150 others, on a bluish, tranquil lake. Not to mention the rainforest with rare wildlife and elephant trekking. Just irresistible, isn't it? If you want to visit Chiao Lan dam or Khao Sok, the easiest way is to book a trip with a reliable tour agency. Hopefully, you will have an opportunity to see this natural wonder of the world before long.

If you want to explore Khao Sok National Park, cruise around Chiao Lan Dam by a long-tail boat and stay overnight on a raft house, we'd like to recommend **Sutin Group**, a leading tour operator in adventure tourism in Southern Thailand. Please see their website for more details of tour programs, www.sutingroup.com.



Comfortable wooden cottages near Chiao Lan Dam

Writer's Note: Just after finishing this article, I received my copy of the July 2014 issue of *National Geographic* and was delighted to find the article on page 114 with most absorbing pictures of the karst region in South China. Of course, they are unsurpassable as natural scenery. But I am not sure whether they are accessible to ordinary tourists or only to a few explorers. I also learned from a local newspaper recently that there are areas of water in the Stone Forest in Yunnan, China. But the largest, Moon Lake, only has a width of 1,500 metres and an average depth of 18 metres. There are limestone mountains surrounding the lake, but no mid-lake islets. □

How to get there:

From Bangkok to Surat Thani:

By road, 644 km. from Bangkok by Highway 4 or by Highway 35, then change to Highway 4 at Pak Tho county. About 8 hours' drive. Daily coach services from Bangkok Southern Bus Terminal. By rail, 650 km, about 12 hours. By air, 1.10 hours.

From Surat Thani to Khao Sok:

The dam is located 70 kilometers west of Surat Thani on Highway No. 401. Travel along the Highway, turn right after parsing kilometer marker 52 and proceed for another 12 kilometers along the road leading to the dam.

Air-con public bus from Surat Thani runs every hour starting at 07:00, passing the Surat Thani Train Station. Tickets can be purchased at the Surat Thani Bus Station located at Talat Kaset. Transit time is around 2 hours. There is also a minibus service departing every hour from 07:30 to 17:30.